

A Nationwide Search for Early American Printing

A talk over Station WDAF (Kansas City)

Tuesday, June 14, 1938, at 4:45 P. M.

By Douglas C. McMurtrie

Kansas City, Missouri
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By Douglas C. McMurtrie
Consultant to the National Director
Historical Records Survey

Interviewed by Miss Irene Gentry,

Acting Librarian of the
Kansas City Public Library

Mr. McMurtie^R, I think the folks in this part of the country would be interested to hear about the nation-wide search for American books and pamphlets early enough in date to be of historical interest and significance. Won't you tell us first, please, why such work is needed?

If we wish to know the true facts of American history, we must obtain them from records written down at the time particular events took place. Human recollection is a treacherous thing, as students of history have found out to their sorrow.

The most important of these timely records, being of interest to a wider circle of people than could be reached by word of mouth, were printed. The very fact that a proclamation or resolution or report of proceedings was printed, is in itself evidence that the text was of more than casual significance. It is important, therefore, to any historian to know of all the pamphlets and books which relate to the particular subject of his inquiry and where he can find them.

Isn't it easy to find books and pamphlets which were important enough to have been printed in editions of several hundred copies or more?

On the contrary, the life of a pamphlet, no matter how important its contents, is exceedingly precarious, unless it happens to have found its way into some well administered library. A collection of pamphlets may have been treasured by grandfather, but the sod is no sooner laid over his

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Gift of the author

grave than the "trash" which has been "gathering dust" is promptly thrown away.

Today not a single copy can be found of many important documents which we know were printed, and many others, of which hundreds were printed, are represented by only a single surviving copy - and this single copy is often found in some wholly unexpected place. I have known scholars who have searched for years for one old pamphlet, containing information important to their work - yet never caught up with it.

Can you give us some examples of specially rare pamphlets of historical importance?

I can mention a few. Interest in the Southern states in the American Revolution was evidenced by "committees of correspondence". The proceedings of the local committee in Newbern, then capital of North Carolina, were printed, but no copy was known to have survived. Recently the workers of the American Imprints Inventory, reported the discovery of a copy among the records of the Moravian Church.

Only one copy of the first message of an Illinois governor is known to exist today, and that is in a private collection in an eastern state.

Only one copy of the printed laws promulgated by the American authorities when they took possession of California is known to exist today. Such instances could be multiplied indefinitely.

You spoke of that North Carolina leaflet being brought to light by the American Imprints Inventory. Under whose auspices is this work being carried on?

When unemployment becomes acute, one of the most difficult groups of people to provide for are those members of the "white collar class" with good mental equipment and training. To provide for such men and women, the W.P.A. has set up a special division under the able direction of a woman, Mrs. Ellen S. Woodward. One of the activities of this division is known as the Historical Records Survey, which is directed by Dr. Luther H. Evans. This organization has been doing a big job, inventorying the public records of every county in the United States.

About a year ago, the Survey set up the American Imprints Inventory, the object of which was to find, describe, and note locations of, all books and pamphlets printed from the beginnings of the press through the centennial year of 1876. The date limit is somewhat later for the Rocky Mountain States, which were relatively late in being settled.

Hundreds of ex-ministers, lawyers, teachers, and clerical workers in need of employment are being put to work, from coast to coast, to search out and record the printed matter already specified. These workers are going systematically through all the titles in important libraries throughout the country, noting those which come within the scope of our interest.

These titles are now being filed by place and date of printing, in a central catalogue in Chicago. It will eventually be possible for us to readily put our hands, for example, on the titles of every known publication printed in Missouri in any given year, or period of years. Experience has proven that lists of titles so arranged disclose publications which were entirely unknown to local historians. Lists of titles, for

interesting regions and periods are being mimeographed for reference. The central catalogue file will eventually be placed in the library of Congress at Washington.

What work is being done in the region
'round and about this station?

Statewide W.P.A. projects, adequately staffed to seek out and record early books and pamphlets (which are referred to technically as "imprints") have been set up and are now operating in Missouri, Iowa and Nebraska. Work in Kansas City libraries will be started in the very near future. In the State of Kansas the work is being done by the staff of the Historical Records Survey.

In a good many libraries there is some material as yet uncatalogued. We always make a special effort to examine such material, and often find among it some special treasure. For example one of our workers at Pittsburgh recently reported a group of uncatalogued pamphlets, one of which turned out to be a publication previously unknown, printed in the second year of the press in Kansas, a truly notable discovery.

Aren't the early books and pamphlets in the
larger libraries well known?

The older books in a few large libraries are relatively well known. But there are, throughout the country, many small, specialized libraries which have noteworthy collections within some specific field of interest. Each religious demonination, for example, has one or more excellent collections of material relating to its own history. There are three or four Masonic libraries, with excellent collections of material relating to that fraternal order. Medical and law libraries must be

Searched for material in those specialized fields. So we pay careful attention to the unusual libraries, off the beaten track, for our work

dividend.

of books and pamphlets printed in our possession, but only if printed

in any other midwestern State. An

example from 1859 is of greater interest

than any printed in New York or

any other examples of western printing,

we will write the American Imprints

at the University of Chicago Library. I repeat: address

of the Kansas City Public Library.

These are the results of

our search by citing a few instances.

On many pages, already we are often able

to determine where certain publications

we were preparing a centennial

we had a file of printed catalogues

historically, an entire blank.

In searching catalogues, we were able

to find only these two, could be seen

at the Historical Society of a neighboring

State. The history of Mississippi, wrote that

of the local yellow fever epidemic

from

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printed in 1823, but he had never been able to find a copy of either. We were able to direct him to one library for the original issue, and to another for the second edition.

Searched for material in those specialized fields. So we pay careful attention to the unusual libraries, off the beaten track, for our work in these libraries usually yields a rich dividend.

We are also interested to learn of books and pamphlets printed in 1876 or earlier, which may be in private possession, but only if printed in Missouri, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, or some other midwestern State. An eight-page pamphlet printed in Kansas City in 1859 is of greater interest and value than a five-volume history of England printed in New York or Boston in the same year. Owners of early examples of western printing, willing to report them, can most conveniently write the American Imprints Inventory, in care of the Kansas City Public Library. I repeat: address the American Imprints Inventory, in care of the Kansas City Public Library.

In what practical ways are the results of
this work helpful?

I can best answer that question by citing a few instances. Although our work is still in its early stages, already we are often able to help out inquirers with information as to where certain publications can be found. A mid-western girls' college was preparing a centennial history. Its records were good and there was a file of printed catalogues for every year but two, which years were historically, an entire blank. Asked whether we could locate the two missing catalogues, we were able to reply promptly that the two desired, and only these two, could be seen or photostated in the library of the historical society of a neighboring state. A man interested in the medical history of Mississippi, wrote that he knew of two editions of a booklet on the local yellow fever epidemic printed in 1823, but he had never been able to find a copy of either. We were able to direct him to one library for the original issue, and to another for the second edition.

Mr. McMurtrie, are all the early publications
your people record as "dry as dust"?

Decidedly not. Some, of course, are laws and legislative proceedings, but many told us at first hand, in the most eloquent way, of events of the day which have since been woven into the very texture of American history. In the early pamphlets printed in this region, are traced the original story of the conflict between advocates of free-soil and slavery. In them we see evidence of the devotion of pioneer missionaries trying, in the face of repeated disappointments, to evangelize and educate the Indians who were the original inhabitants of these prairies. We learn from reports and constitutions of fraternal, social and propaganda organizations, that our ancestors in these parts were "joiners" to about the same degree as our neighbors are today.

In these early imprints we read quaint ordinances prohibiting the grazing of cows in the streets of villages which have since become great cities. And we read of the very inception of political movements which have since changed the whole face of our political economy.

Do the workers in need of this very useful
employment find their tasks interesting?

To me personally, the effect of the work on some members of our staff is intensely interesting. Idleness is a specially acute misfortune to anyone used to mental activity. Many of our workers come to us after long periods of unemployment, during which they have tried every expedient to land a job. When we put them to work at a useful task, suited to their abilities and experience, they gain a new interest in life.

I am aware of the numerous quips regarding W.P.A. work which are current, but I can say most sincerely, that the great majority of the workers on the American Imprints Inventory are making an earnest effort to do a good job. And the administrative heads of the project are insistent that everyone associated with it do thorough and conscientious work.

For many of our people it has changed the whole aspect of life. I am thinking for example, of one man 67 years old, a cultivated gentleman, who had tried his best for over five years to get himself any kind of employment. When he began the imprints work, he entered upon it enthusiastically, working longer hours than required, and sparing no effort to do the best possible work. He could not be more interested if it were a personal business of his own. You can imagine the great increase in satisfaction that this old gentleman now gets out of life.

What is your idea, Mr. McMurtrie, of the permanent value of this inventory, when it is completed?

It is a bit hard for me to answer that question, but I will try to discount my enthusiasm, and give you a conservative reply. It is my own belief that the published results of this work will double the amount of material on most subjects, which is available to historians, and that it will save at least half the time required to look up and consult the sources of historical facts. I am confident the Imprints Inventory will be looked upon, in years to come, as one of the most valuable pieces of work, in the intellectual field, carried through by the Works Progress Administration. And know it will leave a lasting impression on American history.

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